

THERE'S A WORM IN THE APPLE

September 14, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"The serpent said...'God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God...'" --Genesis 3:4,5 (RSV)

Scripture
Genesis 3:1-7

The simple fact is that nobody wants to be told that there is a worm in the apple. None of us wants to know that there is a basic flaw in the human condition, particularly our human condition. It is the least popular topic for religious discourse.

The late Phylis McGinley, a witty and wise poet, observed our reticence about it in a piece entitled Community Church:

"The Rev. Mr. Harcourt, folks agree,
nodding their head in solid satisfaction
Is just the man for the community,
Tall, young, urbane, but capable of action
He pleases where he serves. He marshalls out
The younger crowd, lacks trace of clerical
unction,

Cheers the Kiwanis and the Eagle Scout,
Is popular at every function.
And in the pulpit eloquently speaks
On diverse matters with both wit and clarity:
Art, education, God, the early Greeks,
Psychiatry, St. Paul, true Christian charity,
Vestry repairs that shortly must begin -
All things but sin. He seldom mentions sin."
[Times Three, Selected verse, p. 134]

The subject will win no popularity contest. There is something about us which resists getting up on the morning of the one day off we enjoy per week, dressing up in our Sunday finery, making our way to church to be told that we are, all things considered, mournfully without much socially redeeming value. The prospect is altogether unpleasant and, when one ponders it very long, quite depressing. Who needs it? Besides, we have at least entertained the notion that the whole business is some kind of Freudian projection, that a judging God is no less than a psychological-mythological variation of the parent we once had and that our guilt, anxiety, or dis-ease when we think about it is no more than a fifty year old result of the fact that, at the age of seven we once confided to chum that we wished our mother would die.

We have had enough free floating guilt. We are trying to learn that it is "OK" to feel "OK" about ourselves. We pay money to go to workshops designed to help us affirm who we are, to accept and think positively about our bodies and minds. We buy books to read up on becoming our own best friend, and we are trying to take seriously the admonition of Jesus to love our neighbor as we love ourselves which begins with the assumption that we know how to love ourselves. We know too many people whose lives are diminished, whose spirits are crippled, because they think too little of themselves. And we know, all too often, that the source of it is the notion of their own sinfulness.

Thus - a broad based cultural aversion to the very notion of sin and sinfulness which Phyllis McGinley caught in her poem: and which was marvelously lampooned in the song in West Side Story, "Gee, Officer Krupke," sung by members of a street gang about one of their buddies who has been subjected to a whole battery of juvenile justice social services, designed to rehabilitate him...

"O, Officer Krupke, you've done it again.
This boy don't need a job, he needs a
year in the pen,
It ain't just a question of misunderstood:
Deep down inside him, he's no good."

The same aversion used to show up regularly on "All in the Family." One time Edith Bunker said, "Archie, I was just thinking. In all the years we have been married, you never once said you was sorry." Archie responded: "Edith, I'll gladly say I'm sorry if I ever do anything wrong." [Spencer Merish, God, Man and Archie Bunker, p.30]

Recently, Meg Greenfield, in one of her fine Newsweek editorials asked Why Nothing is Wrong Anymore. She wrote: "As a guide and standard to live by, you don't hear so much about 'right and wrong' these days. The very notion is considered politically, not to say personally, embarrassing, since it has such a repressive, Neanderthal ring to it." [Newsweek, July 28, 1986]

By contrast to the cultural inclination that wants to take a rosy, up-beat position, I would propose that the genius of Judeo-Christian religion is its balanced view of humanity. Several centuries ago the philosopher Pascal wrote: "Without the mystery of original sin man remains a mystery to himself." [See The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. by R. M. Brown, p. 246] I believe he was right. Reinhold Niebuhr quipped, "The doctrine of original sin is the one empirically verifiable doctrine of Christian Faith." [Ibid, p. xii] We could spend all our time this morning documenting that assertion. It is tempting always to do so. And there is a sense in which church-goers think they are hearing the real thing when the preacher bears down on the all - the sins of the world. This preacher will assume that you read the papers: and that at least, on occasion you pause at the bottom of the front page and conclude that after all these years the one consistent thing about us is our astonishing capacity to make a mess of it, and furthermore that when we get together, even though we don't intend it, we manage to create rather massive stains on the canvas of history - like wars, pollution, apartheid, poverty.

I'm going to assume that you want your religious reflection to be a little more stout and honest than "ten steps to happiness." I also assume, believe - rather - that the analysis of the human condition contained in scripture, is accurate, helpful, and that to know it is to participate in that truth which sets us free.

The first problem, however, is that the topic is so grossly trivialized - often by the church. The pietistic tradition in Protestantism and Catholicism notoriously oversimplifies the matter. If sin is simply breaking the common ground rules of moral responsibility it is not a serious problem. It can be overcome, by trying harder, or by engaging in a simple religious rubric. The Bible means more than that. St. Paul confessed that there is something about us that prevents us from doing the good even when we know what it is and want to do it. Sin, in the Biblical idiom, is not trivial.

The second problem we have is that sin has been defined too long by a literalistic reading of the Book of Genesis. The result has been a devastating propensity to focus on sexuality as the context for sin. What we think we read in Genesis goes something like this: Adam and Eve didn't know they were naked until they ate the fruit: then they were embarrassed, and when they were exiled from the Garden and started to make babies, their original flaw was passed on genetically. And so, the Christian Church has at times, usually under the influence of Greeks, taught that sin is transmitted sexually: that when the Psalm says "in sin my mother conceived me" what it means is that the act of sexual intercourse is itself so sinful that when conception occurs the child is infected. It's no wonder then, that celibacy has seemed preferable at times. It is why we take care to regulate the degree of sexual explicitness our children can see in motion pictures, but don't mind the brutality and dehumanizing violence of Rambo or Texas Chain Saw Massacre.

The equation of sexuality with sin is not what the Bible means. But it is a major theological detour that the Christian Church often takes. The corrective is always the life affirming, joyful sensuality of the Old Testament, the acknowledgement that sexuality was God's idea, not as an afterthought, but that maleness and femaleness together are what God intends humanity to be, and, of course, that marvelous affirmation which occurs in the creation story when God observes the creation and says "It is good. It is very good."

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve is a sustained and profound look at the human condition. Adam - man: Eve - woman: are all of us. The story suggests that the purpose of the whole project of creation is a humanity which lives in harmony with the creator. One Biblical scholar, commenting on Genesis 3 puts it very clearly: "The destiny of the human creature is to live in God's world...with God's other creatures, on God's terms." [Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, Interpretation, p. 40]

What happens in the story is that the man and woman refuse to do that. God's terms are rejected. Human terms are adopted instead. God says, "don't touch the tree." The man and woman conclude that they know better. The result is disaster, alienation, exile and indescribable family

tragedy as one son murders the other. The classic and altogether serious Judeo Christian idea of sin is that human beings substitute themselves for God.

The synonyms we use are pride, egotism, self-centeredness. Christianity suggests that it is part of the given about us. It is our original sin in that to be human is to be self-centered, deeply and profoundly. We are motivated, at levels so deep within ourselves we can't possibly understand them, or even be aware of them, by drives for self-protection, self-preservation, security and self-enrichment. To act it out, to be natural as it were - is to be in conflict with one's neighbors - which, if you believe God created them also, - is to be in conflict with God. The Psalmist understood that too - "Against thee, and thee only have I sinned."

Bertrand Russell was no Christian but he understood the human condition in a way that reflects the third chapter of Genesis. "Every man would like to be God," he wrote. "Some find it difficult to admit the impossibility."

Sin as selfishness, self-centeredness,...in the language of theology, filling that place at the center of my being which God has created there - for God; filling it with me-my-mine - can be observed along the entire spectrum of human behavior; from dumping toxic wastes into the rivers, to killing off Great White Sharks for the thrill of it, to playing the relatively harmless cocktail party conversation game "mine is better than yours" which prevents us from ever hearing each other; to the newly fashionable relational posture which says - my gratification, my needs, my fulfillment come first, all the way back up to the insidious but devilishly persistent notion that the color of my skin grants me the innate right to subjugate, discriminate against, eliminate, if need be, people whose skin color is different. Professor Martin Marty wrote an editorial in the Tribune last Thursday about his recent experience teaching in South Africa, and the almost bizarre disparity between the kindness and generosity and religious fidelity of the white people of Capetown and the absolute and utter evil of the system they have created. Marty said that it was Reinhold Niebuhr, and the classic Christian definition of sin he wrote about in a book Moral Man and Immoral Society which gave Marty a framework to begin to understand how it is possible for basically well-meaning, kind people, to participate in gross historic evil.

I think the Judeo-Christian assessment is the realistic view of humanity. Sin is real. It is healthy, I believe to acknowledge it, be ashamed of it and to say "I'm sorry" for it - to one another and to God. Regardless of the arena or the scope of egotism, I believe we need to be delivered from it. I believe it is always against God. When I put another person down, for instance, what is happening is that I have pushed aside the God who is the creator of both of us to make room for my expansive ego.

There is another side to it as well. Sin is thinking too highly of ourselves but it is also thinking too little of ourselves, thinking so little of ourselves that we relinquish responsibility for our own lives and the life of the world. The classic name for it is sloth. It inspired

Dr. Karl Menninger to write a wonderful book several years ago under the title, What Ever Became of Sin? It is also part of what Genesis 3 is saying about the human condition in the story of a man who blames the woman for his disobedience and the woman who blames the snake. We'll think about it next week.

For now my hope is that the story opens a window into ourselves - through which we can understand something very important.

The mystery is that the deeper one probes into one's own spirit, the more conscious of sin one becomes. The more spiritual one is, the more aware of the gap between what is - and what ought to be. Literature is full of it. The publishing event of the summer was a Hemmingway novel about human ambiguity and the curious deterioration of human relationships and human personality under the power of self-gratification. Its title, significantly is, The Garden of Eden. The publishing event of the fall is a new John Updike novel which, again, explores the flaws in our humamity, even the best of us. God's word, God's disclosure of the human condition, will be expressed, it seems, sometimes in very curious places.

And it's a good bet that anyone who has struggled with it personally, great people of literature, or little people who simply wonder what has gone wrong, why this relationship is crumbling in my hands, why I do the things I do, why I actually end up hurting the people I love, why I never quite measure up to my own expectations of myself, why my life contains its shadowy side of deception, and betrayal, - all who know about that listen with special care when St. Paul, from a distance of 2,000 years, confesses:

"I do not understand my own actions...I do not do what I want...I do they very thing I hate...I see in my own numbers another law at war with the law of my mind. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death!" [Romans 7:15,23]

That's strong medicine. Paul, on sin, is not for the faint-hearted.

It was St. Paul's greatest modern interpreter, Karl Barth, who called the church back from the insipid positiveism of the early part of this century: a shallow optimism that tried to look the other way while Germany, the citadel of Christian civilization, the culture which produced Martin Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach somehow found it possible not to see the Brown Shirts or hear the hob-nailed boots in the night streets and not to notice when the first of six million Jews began to disappear.

It was Barth who reminded 20th Century Christians that there is a capacity for evil within us, that to know that about ourselves is not repressive, guilt enducing, but healthy, redemptive, and that all hope begins at least with honesty about the human condition.

Barth taught, as well, that the person of deep religion will be more sensitive to sin, know about sin, struggle with it, agonize over it. Honest religion, Barth warned, won't produce serenity, peace and the glow of righteous self-satisfaction. If it's honest religion it will inevitably reveal the depth of the human dilemma. Popular peace of mind merchants need to rediscover Barth when he wrote almost enviously about the fortunate

pagan who is at peace... "Happy the man who is able to deny the truth. May he long remain innocent of his own questionableness." [The Epistle to the Romans, p. 266]

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," the author of the First Epistle of John said to the early church.

The Gospel of Christ is an invitation, not to a life-time of guilt, but to an honest acknowledgement of the human condition: an invitation to come clean, to know the truth about ourselves.

It is an invitation which requires courage. There is much about us which resists the effort. There are a multitude of convenient reasons for not probing the depths of our own spirit. The Gospel, by contrast, is an invitation to a degree of integrity about ourselves which will understand what St. Paul meant - "O, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me?"

Honest religion invites us to an integrity that at times approaches despair about the human prospect. But at the same time is an invitation to know a God who has created us as we are - and who is so committed to us that he does not give up on the project when we fail. It is the assurance of that God's forgiveness and acceptance and recreating love.

It is the astonishing suggestion that the God who created us, who called us into being and willed us to live in God's world, with God's other creatures, on God's terms, has watched us violate that covenant, and instead of writing us off, has been moved to come among us, radically, to live in this creation, in a way that not only shows how it is supposed to be done, but a way which somehow gathers up our failures, our personal betrayals, our sin, in the strong arms of love. God, our creator, loves us - in the way a good parent loves - with particular strength - a disobedient and rebellious child. The Gospel is the invitation to know and to trust God's love expressed in Jesus Christ which somehow, subject it to the worst example of human sin, a conspiracy which managed to crucify it, rose above human sin, is victorious over it, and promises that in the embrace of that strong love we are safe and free, new every morning.

"Who will deliver me?" St. Paul asked, in what sounds for all the world like the darkest pit of despair. And then answered with Gospel, with the sublime simplicity of the Creator's love - "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Thanks be to God, indeed! Amen.

Praise be to you, Lord God, for the mystery of it all: for the potential in all of us, for truth and beauty and nobility. Praise be to you for freedom to fail, freedom not to measure up. Praise be to you for insight and dis-ease and guilt strong enough to make us wonder about ourselves. Praise be to you for love big enough to forgive us and create us anew each day.

Praise be to you, Lord God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.